

# Puncturing an Oxford Myth: the Truth about the ‘Infamous’ O’Sheas and the Oxford University Museum

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## SUMMARY

*This paper covers three main areas. The first is the artistic attribution of the carvings of the capitals and corbels in the lower court of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. The second is the stories about the O’Shea brothers, James and John, and Edward Whelan, their nephew or cousin: there is considerable discrepancy about these men’s antics and the reality. The third is the apparently single Trevelyan-sponsored bay and capital (Bay 6): it has emerged that instead of one, there are, in fact, seven. The seven have been identified and located within the court of the museum.*

The initial building contract for the University Museum of Natural History included no provision for the cost of carving or decoration, either inside or out. The omission was to a considerable extent rectified through John Ruskin’s involvement. Ruskin quickly involved his friends in the project. He, Benjamin Woodward, Dr Henry Acland, and John Phillips were all shrewd in soliciting funds from donors eager to participate in the grand project of building the museum. But while John Ruskin had many ideas about decorating the inner courts of the museum, his involvement was primarily on the exterior. The details of interior design of the bays of the courts was left to John Phillips and executed in part by stone carvers Benjamin Woodward had brought from Ireland. Most people in Oxford have heard stories of the carvers of the Oxford University Museum. Indeed, James and John O’Shea and Edward Whelan are better remembered for the stories told about them than for their work at the museum. Any pamphlet, book, or catalogue is likely to mention the O’Sheas, sometimes prefixed by the epithet ‘infamous’ on account of their reputation as a thoroughly unruly bunch of artists. They are portrayed as being, on the one hand, talented but simple Irish workmen, content with their beer and bread, and happy to work on the carvings. On the other hand, they are portrayed as problematic – they would not work from designs, but only from nature.

The museum’s remarkable decoration has frequently been remarked upon.<sup>1</sup> The rendering of the plants and foliage in the wrought-iron capitals and the spandrels is breathtaking. But beautiful as the metal work is, it suffers by comparison with the stone carving wrought by the Irish O’Shea brothers and their nephew or cousin (he has been described as both) Edward Whelan. To a layperson there is something almost magical about taking a block of roughly hewn stone and carving it to a form that is an interesting and complex composition of recognizable objects. In this case, the objects are plants and animals that seem so real that one wants to touch them to see if they are really made of stone. The leaves appear so soft and supple that one might think that they could be made of some soft and plastic material. Or the composition may be so complex (ferns that turn and twist back on each other or seem to unfurl) that it seems impossible to execute.

The museum archives show that James O’Shea did the carving on the exterior of the building. Little exterior carving had been completed by October 1858. That makes sense because the building process was still going on. The most extensive carving at an early date (1857–8) was

<sup>1</sup> *The Builder* (12 June 1860), p. 398; *Illustrated London News* (6 Oct. 1860), pp. 310, 320.

carried out on the capitals and voussoirs of the tall windows in the two octagonal stair towers.<sup>2</sup> The only other carving in 1858 was round the windows and other elements in the upper stage of the towers and the string course beneath it.<sup>3</sup> It may be assumed that those were completed at this time primarily because the contractors' scaffolding was available, and because the windows gave an idea of what the finished building might look like. It is important to remember that the funds for the decorations and carvings came from donations. The completed exterior carvings served to remind potential donors that they could be a part of something important and grand.

Photographs show the earliest carving on the west front was in the voussoirs of the southernmost window on the ground floor. The other windows have only a ring of carving along the top. The result is a haphazard feel to the front of the building, which is contrary to Woodward's preference for the windows to be completed in sequence one above the other.<sup>4</sup> Accounts reveal that generally the upper windows were carved before the lower ones.<sup>5</sup>

The first donated window to be carved was the notorious 'cat window', followed by the 'Ruskin window' below it in 1859. As one faces the main entrance to the museum, the cat window is the second window on the right in the upper storey. The Ruskin window is a twin lancet window on the ground floor, directly below it. John Ruskin had donated £300 for the restructuring of the lower windows and the decoration of one window. He designed a plan for the window and assisted in the supervision of James O'Shea's execution of the design. If, as is sometimes claimed, O'Shea had feelings or opinions about John Ruskin getting on the scaffold and supervising and criticizing his work, no record survives.

Henry Acland's notorious account of the story surrounding the 'cat window' appeared in 1893, in the fifth edition of his account of the museum.<sup>6</sup> There Acland states that in late 1859 James O'Shea rushed to Acland's home to tell him that the Revd Plumtre, Master of University College, had told him to stop the carving of the window. According to Acland, O'Shea, on his own volition, was carving monkeys round the window, to which the Master objected. The monkeys smacked of Darwinism and might prove to be embarrassing and scandalous to the university. O'Shea's response was to change the monkeys to cats – in reality much easier said than done. This was the last straw from an uppity workman, and O'Shea was fired. He was permitted to return to work, but money for the project had now run out. The work would have to stop. O'Shea pleaded to be allowed to continue for no pay, but to no avail. Acland tells how he went along to say goodbye to O'Shea and found him on a ladder in the porch area, carving parrots and owls in mockery of members of the university. This was the final insult: Acland himself made O'Shea knock the heads off the birds. Both O'Shea brothers were fired, and they left in disgrace, practically in the dead of night. Benjamin Woodward died soon after, and the university was reluctant to put any more money towards the museum. Ruskin became bored with the whole thing, and thus the museum was not completed. That is the story that has been repeated until it has achieved canonical status. Sadly, though delightful, it is not true. If it has any Darwinian connection, it is that of a creationist myth. Acland had greatly embellished the facts and made theatre of what was undeniably an interesting thirty-four-year-old story.

It is true that work stopped on the carving of the upper window for a time in October 1859. But at the sub-delegacy meeting of 11 October 1859, attended by the Revd Plumtre, Edward Liddell, the Dean of Christ Church, Dr Acland, and Mr Phillips, the first topic of concern was the colour of the painted ceiling of the Radcliffe Library. It was felt to be too brilliant and would

<sup>2</sup> Oxford University Museum of Natural History archives [hereafter OUM archives], photograph box 1, nos 1, 24, 33, 34.

<sup>3</sup> OUM archives, photograph box 1, no. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Woodward to sub-delegacy meeting, 11 Oct. 1859: quoted by Frederick O'Dwyer, *The Architecture of Deane and Woodward* (Cork, 1997), pp. 238–9.

<sup>5</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 10; box 4, folder 1(ii).

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Daniels and Geoff Brandwood, eds, *Ruskin and Architecture* (Reading, 2003), p. 76.

distract the students. The second item was the carving of the upper window on the west side. The concerns noted were not the subject matter of the window, but the amount of carving taking place. Questions were raised about whether the amount of carving had been approved and who was expected to pay for the additional expense. The concern was about cost overrun, not the subject of the sculpture. A letter from Benjamin Woodward was read out, explaining that Acland was the donor of the money for that particular window and that the amount of carving would not lead to excessive expense. There was some further discussion about the cost of the carving of the windows, and if Acland said anything, it was not noted.<sup>7</sup> If, in fact, the original subject of the window had been monkeys, it would have been determined between Acland, the donor, and the carver. There exists a note from James O'Shea to Acland with a sketch of an upper window surround with monkeys.<sup>8</sup> Whether monkeys were the original subject for the window decoration must remain unknown, but cats are definitely there now. During this critical time of debate and concern James O'Shea was paid, and his salary was not docked.<sup>9</sup>

As for Acland's colourful account of O'Shea and the owls and parrots, nothing fits. The cat window incident happened in the autumn of 1859. Financial records indicate that James was still working at the museum, outside on the windows, until the end of June 1861. Edward continued to work until the middle of October. James was called back in 1879 to carve the capitals on the porch (the inner porch, not the outer facade of the building). The porch contains capitals that do indeed have owls and parrots, and the birds do still have their heads.

Many people today assume that the rough blocking on the inner arch above the entryway – the entrance portal in the facade of the building – is the place where O'Shea was attempting his protest and carving the owls and parrots. That appears to be another myth. Initially Ruskin, Woodward, and others, Acland included, planned an elaborate entrance to the museum. It was to be very impressive, embellished with carvings and statues. Convocation, however, refused the expenditure, and the monies did not materialize, so the design was pared back to the arched entryway that is there now. The designs for the outer porch were by John Pollen and Thomas Woolner. Pollen designed the voussoirs, and Woolner was to design the figurative sculpture for the tympanum and carry out the carving. Unfortunately work stopped abruptly when the money ran out. That is why some of the stone of the inner arch is roughly blocked on one side. Frederick O'Dwyer's book, *The Architecture of Deane and Woodward*, mentions that Acland himself claimed that the authorities halted the work and prevented its completion.<sup>10</sup> O'Dwyer mentions an entry for 22 September 1861 in the diary of William Michael Rossetti: 'Woolner back from the Trevelyan – says that Ruskin at Oxford had compelled a carver he had sent down to discontinue carving a figure by Pollen on the arch at the Oxford Museum, on the ground of its being sensual.'<sup>11</sup> This would indicate that Thomas Woolner was not the carver. The ledgers contain no records for this time, so the identity of the carver or carvers of the outer facade of the entryway must remain unknown.

When research on this project began, the focus was to identify the artists and their carvings. The carvings are beautiful works of art, and yet it seemed that the men were notable only for the stories about them. A reference in O'Dwyer's book to James O'Shea's return to Oxford in 1879 to complete the carvings on the porch started the questions regarding the truth of the story.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> OUM archives, box 5a.

<sup>8</sup> Eve Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic: the Architecture of Deane and Woodward, 1845–1861* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), Illustration section, Fig. 87; O'Dwyer, *Deane and Woodward*, pp. 240–2.

<sup>9</sup> OUM archives, box 4, folder 4. There are two interesting financial notations from Plumtre. The first is a note to Woodward's account for expenses, 1 Oct.–12 Nov., for carving the capitals on the court. The amount was £13 16s. On the reverse there is a note that Bramwell received a cheque for £13 16s. The second is a note from Plumtre that James O'Shea will be paid £9 for carving the west front of one of the upper windows, 'as per agreement'. The original dates of 1 Oct.–12 Nov. are crossed out.

<sup>10</sup> O'Dwyer, *Deane and Woodward*, p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

It was not logical that the university would re-hire a man for this significant project who had a history of not following directions and of being totally unpredictable, and who had been fired for disobedience and for mocking members of the university.

Everyone knew the stories about the carvers, but when it came to who actually carved what, things were vague. The identity of the artists who carved some of the capitals or corbels was documented at the time of completion, and once an artist's manner and style were delineated one could recognize his work throughout the court – up to a point. But there had been no systematic study of which artist had worked in which bays.

The O'Shea brothers and Edward Whelan were brought to Oxford from Ireland by the museum's architect, Benjamin Woodward. He had employed them at Trinity College, Dublin, and felt that their work was exceptionally fine. With these stone masons, Woodward felt that he could follow John Ruskin's precept of skilled workmen being free to design their work as they go with minimal direction and supervision. After being convinced of their skills for the job, John Ruskin wrote to Acland that the 'Museum is ... the first building raised in England since the close of the fifteenth century, which has fearlessly put to new trial this old faith in the ... genius of the unassisted workman who gathered out of nature the materials he needed.'<sup>13</sup> Ruskin should have remembered the adage 'be careful of what you wish for, you might just get it'.

The artistic precepts behind the construction of the Oxford University Museum united talented, influential men with a common objective. Benjamin Woodward was ultimately responsible for the building design and the execution of it. During the time that the building was being erected he spent a portion of each year in Oxford, London, and Ireland. He, alone or sometimes with his business partner T. N. Deane, travelled back and forth from Ireland to check the progress. During the last three years of his life, as his tuberculosis developed, he tended to visit the Continent frequently. During his absences William C. C. Bramwell, the clerk of works, was responsible for the supervision of the building. John Ruskin, upon whose artistic concepts and ideas the design for the museum was based, took upon himself the responsibility of artistic direction, as well as promoting and handling subscriptions for the windows. John Phillips, the first Keeper of the museum, was actively engaged in the planning and execution of the interior, while Henry Acland was busily involved in all aspects of the planning and fund-raising. In addition to those gentlemen, the university itself was a major influence. In the form of the delegacy or the sub-delegacy it had to approve every design change proposed to the original building plans.<sup>14</sup>

John Phillips planned the building to be a teaching tool. Within the court the plans called for 126 columns, 64 piers, and 192 capitals and corbels. Each column shaft would be of a different decorative stone found in Britain, and the capitals were to be carved into flora and fauna representing different botanical orders. Phillips planned every detail of the courts. He planned the sequence of the stones of the shafts and all the plants for the capitals and for the corbels. At the beginning he even attempted to plan which carver would do each bay.<sup>15</sup> The artists quickly ignored his plan and divided the bays to meet their own organizational needs and skills. The carvers may have ignored his initial plan for their organization, but they followed his plan for the subjects of the carvings.

The thirty capitals, as well as corbels and piers attributed to the O'Shea brothers and Edward Whelan on the main floor, reveal their talent and originality. Each carving is different and displays the freedom and in some cases the artistic exuberance of the artist. The men ignored John Ruskin's attempts to impose his designs on their work, and Phillips gave them a free hand in the designs.<sup>16</sup> The sculptors were insistent that they did not work from drawings, only from nature. Each morning, in accordance with the botanical plans for each of the bays designed by John Phillips,

<sup>13</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner and Jennifer Sherwood, *Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 281.

<sup>14</sup> OUM archives, box 5a.

<sup>15</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 6.

<sup>16</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 6. Phillips's notes to the carvers.

they would bring samples of plants from the Botanic Gardens to the museum site and begin carving. The few times that Phillips attempted to impose constraints as to the final composition of a capital were in connection with the Trevelyan capitals. When Lady Pauline Trevelyan had made a sketch for one of her donated capitals, Phillips attempted to incorporate her vision into the final design.<sup>17</sup>

The stonework on the lower gallery is clearly the work of at least three separate artists – the two O'Shea brothers and Whelan. Three factors need to be taken into account when trying to identify the artist – the complexity of the compositions, the sense of movement or lack of it, and the rendering of the foliage. Fortunately in some cases there is contemporary written evidence which helps to identify a particular sculptor.<sup>18</sup> Frederick O'Dwyer examined the financial evidence, an approach which is imitated here.<sup>19</sup> Besides examining the ledgers of Bramwell and Plumptre, John Phillips's records and notes are also examined. They are invaluable to understanding the plan and sequence of the carvings and in some cases the power struggles that occurred. Phillips could, and on occasions did, withhold money if the work was not completed to his satisfaction.<sup>20</sup>

The university was exacting in what it spent on the construction of the museum. There are records of every expense made towards construction and decoration. Usually a simple note, such as 'Carvers in the court', was followed by an amount. We know that until the end of December 1859 the three carvers would have earned £5 5s. a week. But beginning in January 1860 the records show that each carver was paid £2 a week. Obviously the amounts paid out provide clues to the number of men working. Thus a payment of £6 meant that three men were working in the court that week. If two men were working in the court and one man was working outside, the notes on the weekly ledger might read: 'Carvers in the court £4.0.0; Lower west front window £2.0.0'.

The outside carver would have been James O'Shea. He is credited with the carvings on the exterior of the building as well as various bays of the lower court. A fourth carver, Mr Flinn, appears in the ledgers for a few weeks in February and March of 1860, when there was a flurry of work being completed in the court. He was not paid as much a week as the others, and there is no record of his responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> There is nothing to substantiate the claim of Georgiana Burne-Jones that both Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris each carved one capital at the museum, apart from a mention of it by Eve Blau.<sup>22</sup> In fact, one of the capitals cited by Georgiana Burne-Jones as being carved by Rossetti was attributed to Edward Whelan when it was executed.<sup>23</sup> Given the personalities of both Rossetti and Morris, it is likely that if they had carved capitals for the museum it would have been common knowledge. There is a notation by O'Dwyer of a note from Rossetti to William Bell Scott, Master of the Newcastle School of Design, with regard to creating a design for one of the capitals of the museum: 'You asked about the capitals (botanical) for the Oxford Museum. I have not undertaken any, but promised to design the sculpture in the arched doorway to the street.'<sup>24</sup>

#### A TOUR OF THE LOWER COURT

In order to understand the sequence of the carvings and their provenance, one must start with an understanding of Benjamin Woodward's plan and bear in mind a few practical considerations. There is a definite sequence to the order of the carving of the lower court (see Plate 16). The

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> F. G. Stephens, 'The Oxford University Museum', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 5 (Apr. 1862), pp. 525–33.

<sup>19</sup> O'Dwyer, *Deane and Woodward*, p. 246.

<sup>20</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 7(i); box 4, folder 4.

<sup>21</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 10; box 4, folder 1(i).

<sup>22</sup> Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic*, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> Stephens, 'Oxford University Museum', p. 530.

<sup>24</sup> O'Dwyer, *Deane and Woodward*, p. 217.

carvers began on the west corridor Bay 1 and then moved round to the north, then east, and finished along the south corridor, ending with Bay 30. To orient oneself, if one enters the museum from the main entrance, one will enter the lower court by passing through one of three archways in the west corridor. If one turns to the right and goes to the farthest bay on the right, that will be Bay 1. As one passes through the sequence of the bays, one will always be moving towards the right, and eventually will end back in this corner with Bay 30.

In the lower court a bay consists of a double arch, flanked on both sides by stone piers. The arches meet with a shaft of British stone, topped with a carved capital. The carvings on the inside of the piers facing into the bay are the corbels. They are labelled a or b on Plate 16, depending upon their placement to the left or right of the capital. As one faces a bay from the court, corbel a will always be to the left of the capital, while corbel b will be to the right. The spurs are the carvings on the corners of the base of the shaft. Where a plant's common name is not known, it will be called by its Latin name.<sup>25</sup>

The first practical consideration is that only one carver worked in a bay at any given time; there was simply not enough space to allow more than one man, with his tools and the mess he would be making, to be working within a bay. The second consideration is that the carvers took on at least two bays at a time. The men were initially charged for the use of the scaffolding necessary to reach the stone. In the early ledgers there were references to the cost of scaffolding being deducted periodically from different carvers' weekly pay.<sup>26</sup> The men would therefore have wanted to minimize the expense of and maximize the use of the scaffolding. They would claim a work area that would span a distance of at least two bays. That being stated, each of the carvers took on a span of three bays on more than one occasion.

#### *West Side Corridor*

*Bays 1, 2, and 3: James O'Shea.* In looking at James's art, one looks for the characteristic complexity of the composition, the detail and rendering of the subject, a sense of pliability in the subject, his fondness for deep undercutting, a sense of movement, and the introduction of living things – animals and insects (a characteristic that is continuous throughout his carvings). His compositions engage the viewers and invite them to move about the piece to see what else may be there lurking in the foliage.

James worked backwards, beginning the carving with Bay 3, and then moved to Bay 2, and then Bay 1. Bay 3's capital subject is date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*), with animals. This bay was the first carving that he did at the museum which was meant to be viewed in close proximity (see Fig. 3). All the other carvings he had previously completed at the museum were outside and meant to be viewed from a distance. The forms were therefore less precise, and the carving and undercutting in the stone was more exaggerated, in order to get the effect from a distance. As he worked from Bay 3 to Bay 1, the designs and compositions became more complex and detailed and involved.

Bay 1's subject is water plantain (*Alisma plantago*) with woodcock, crayfish, and frogs (see Fig. 1). Here the composition is complex and full of interest. There are different types of water plants surrounding the capital. The plants and leaves are carved with the attention to detail, the deep undercutting, and that sense of pliability that James is able to create. Animals move in and out among the plants and round the base of the capital.

Bay 2's capital subject is flowering rushes (*Butomus umbellatus*), with birds and dragonflies (see Fig. 2). Here the rendering of the rushes and animals is more detailed than the previous capital, and the composition is much more complex and interesting. The capital is surrounded with rushes and flowers that appear 'pliable' and invite touch. There is a beautifully rendered bird, paused forever while bursting out of the rushes in flight. And because James O'Shea was able to

<sup>25</sup> OUM web site, <http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk/learning/htmls/columns.htm> [Accessed Nov. 2007].

<sup>26</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 10; box 4, folder 1(i).



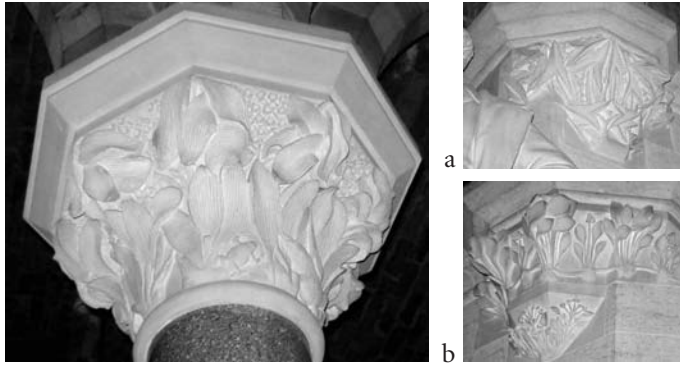


Fig. 1. Bay 1. Capital, water plantain. Corbel a, common arrowhead. Corbel b, water plantain. Mason, James O'Shea. (*Photographs by author.*)

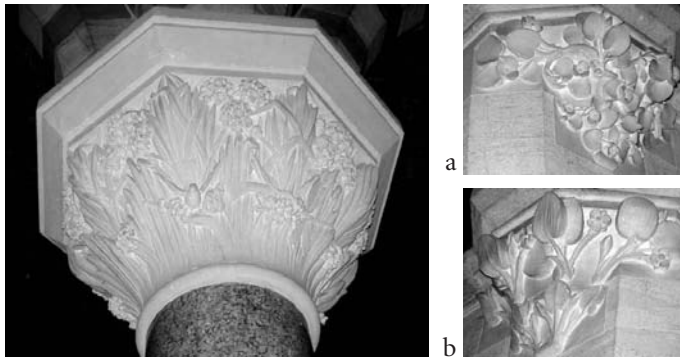


Fig. 2. Bay 2. Capital, flowering rush. Corbel a, velvet leaf. Corbel b, velvet leaf. Mason, James O'Shea. (*Photographs by author.*)

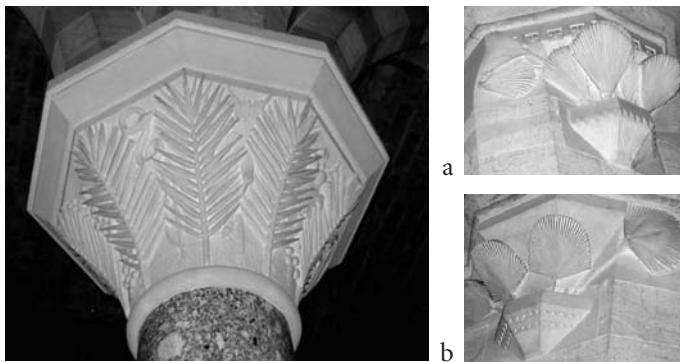


Fig. 3. Bay 3. Capital, date palm. Corbel a, fan palm. Corbel b, fan palm. Mason, James O'Shea. (*Photographs by author.*)

create an interesting tension within the composition, we as viewers are compelled to look at the capital from different angles. What flushed the bird from the rushes? What else is occurring in the composition? What are we missing?

The design of Bay 3 is by far the simplest in design and composition of the first three bays (see Fig. 3). The forms are simple, with beautifully rendered details. Fronds of a date palm are basically placed upright round the capital. The fronds provide strong diagonal lines, and a snake circles and weaves its way down and through them. A bird is visible among the fronds, probably hunting the insect that is beneath it.

Besides his characteristic style and complexity, the evidence for identifying all of James O'Shea's work on the lower court occurs early in 1860. Before the end of January James made a claim to

Phillips for payment for his completed work in the lower court.<sup>27</sup> On the west side he claimed for three complete bays, two bases, and two spurs. In response, Phillips countered with a request that James finish all the bases and spurs of Bays 1, 2, and 3.<sup>28</sup>

James worked in the lower court from the end of January 1860 to mid-March 1860, completing all the unfinished work that Phillips assigned to him. He received the balance (£18 19s. 7d.) on 26 March 1860.

*Bays 4 and 5: John O'Shea.* John O'Shea probably completed Bay 4 before Bay 5. His style and handling of the subject are quite different from those of his brother. John's compositions are simple, characterized by beautiful rendering of the subject material, deep undercutting, and a sense of pliability, but with little of the complex composition, the business, the clutter, the movement, the whimsy, and the surprise that is typical in James's work. His designs appear quite modern. There is a sense of 'quiet detachment' to his work, which has a static quality.

Bay 4's subject is coconut palm (*cocos nucifera*) (see Fig. 4). Round the capital there are many beautifully carved palm fronds. The composition is complete and whole, yet static. We have no desire or need to wander about the capital to look from different angles. There is nothing added, nothing different – there is no element of surprise. Corbel a is date palm, and although this is the same type of plant as the one that James carved on the capital of Bay 3, John's rendering is quite different. He has placed a cluster of palm fronds that seem to spill out about the corbel, and the fronds are beautifully rendered, but there is no engagement between the composition and the viewer.

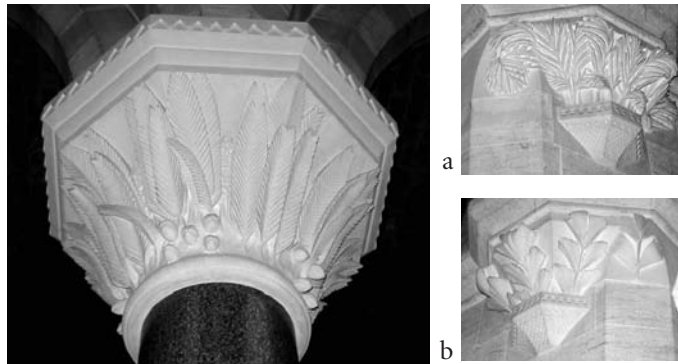


Fig. 4. Bay 4. Capital, coconut palm. Corbel a, date palm. Corbel b, palm. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

The capital of Bay 5's subject is pickerel weed (*Pontederia cordata*) and a variety of lily (see Fig. 5). Here there is a cluster of plants literally wrapped about the capital. There is even a bird included in this composition, but it looks as though it is simply placed among the plants. There is no interaction or engagement between the bird and the plant, or the viewer.

Unlike James, whose payment requests John Phillips had to counter with vague, and occasionally not so vague, threats of non-payment in order to get him to finish the details, John just did his work and got paid. There are no records or notes that anyone contributed to the completion of any of the bays that John worked on. Yet his style is so different from either his brother or Edward Whelan that his work is distinct.

<sup>27</sup> OUM archives, box 4, folder 4.

<sup>28</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 7(i).



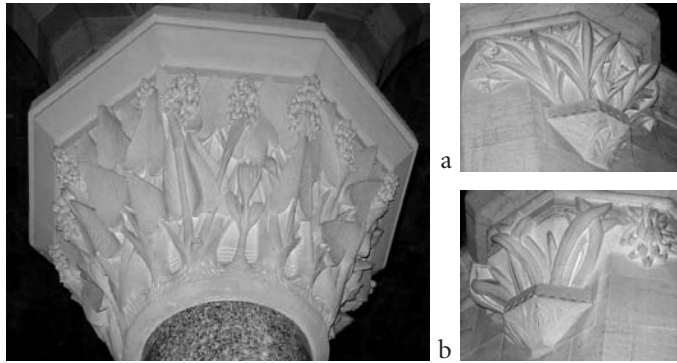


Fig. 5. Bay 5. Capital, pickerel weed. Corbel a, spiderwort. Corbel b, *Dracaena* sp. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

*Bay 6: Edward Whelan.* Edward completed only one bay on the west side corridor; however, it was a very important one. This bay was designated the Trevelyan Capital, and the money was given by Lord and Lady Trevelyan. They were close friends of John Ruskin and supported the Pre-Raphaelite movement. They were wealthy, highly respected, and their opinions were valued. It was felt that if Lord and Lady Trevelyan supported the concept of the museum, others would follow. Woodward asked Lady Pauline to submit a drawing or a sketch of what she wanted her capital to look like. There was the expectation of many donations pouring in if Pauline was happy with the result. There was much activity in the planning. Lots of letters and notes passed from Henry Acland to Lady Trevelyan and back and forth to Woodward: notes of encouragement and support to Pauline – come and participate, be part of something new and great, what do you wish your capital to look like? Give us a picture and ideas; the carvers will do the rest. Notes between Acland and Woodward stressed the need to hurry things up and get the carvings started. Since the Trevelyan made many donations to the decoration of the museum one may assume she was pleased with the results. John Phillips's records of the contributors to the museum decoration fund indicate that the Trevelyan gave £50 for five shafts and five capitals. Later records show that Lady Trevelyan personally gave £10 for two additional capitals.<sup>29</sup> Existing sketches and Phillips's notes indicate which capitals they are.<sup>30</sup>

The capital for Bay 6 depicts a huge bouquet of lilies and tulips (*Lilium candidum*, *tulipa*, and *fritillaria*) which elaborates upon and complements Lady Trevelyan's sketch (see Fig. 6).<sup>31</sup> The sketch consists of a couple of lily-like flowers pasted against a capital. The drawing is very basic. Edward could be counted on to give the patrons what they wanted. If they wanted a large bouquet of tulips and lilies, that is what he would give them.

Edward's style never quite became formalized – at least here in the lower court of the museum. He had definite talent and skills, and he tended to like certain features and aspects within his compositions. He was, however, influenced by whichever kinsman he was working near. When he worked near John, the compositions were simplified and decorative. When he worked near James, freedom abounded, and anything and everything got tossed into the composition. This becomes clear on the north side corridor. The suspicion arises that he had not internalized a sense of his own identity and his own style. That is why he seems to be influenced by whomever he was working near. That he was a gifted and a skilful craftsman is not in doubt: it is rather a question of whether he was an artist, with a small 'a'.

<sup>29</sup> OUM archives, box 5, folder 5.

<sup>30</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 6..

<sup>31</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 6. Lady Trevelyan's sketch consists of a couple of lily-like flowers standing against a capital. Phillips's note to the carvers indicates types of flowers to include in the composition.

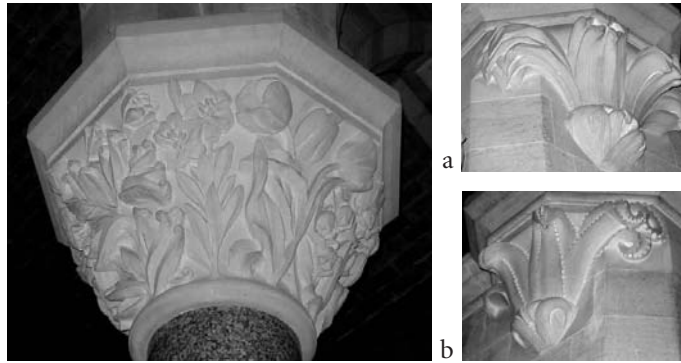


Fig. 6. Bay 6. Capital, variety of lilies and tulips. Corbel a, yucca. Corbel b, aloe. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

Here in Bay 6 Edward's design and composition are less complex than James's, but more involved than John's. His forms and shapes move about back and forth round the capital, and, yes, he has added a bird. At the end, however, the capital is still basically a lovely bouquet of tulips and lilies. An interesting part of this bay, other than the Trevelyan capital, that got noticed at the time of its carving is the corbel of the aloe (corbel b.). It made a big impression on F. G. Stephens, a reporter for *Macmillan's Magazine*. Stephens loved the way the aloe moved round the edge of the pier.<sup>32</sup> The form of the aloe does indeed convey a sense of thickness and leathery texture.

#### *North Side Corridor*

*Bay 7: Edward Whelan.* John's influence on Edward's work is seen here in Bay 7 (see Fig. 7). Compared with the composition of Bay 6, there is a sense of restraint and simplicity in the design and composition of the capital that will carry over to the next few bays that Edward completed. He was working next to John at this time, and James was probably working outside.

The composition of screw pine (*Pandanus*) for the capital is seemingly simple, yet the subject is anything but. Even though the design and composition may at first look simple, with a limited number of pine cones placed round the capital, there would be nothing easy about carving the strong diagonal angles on the pine cones. Those angles are moving the eye round the capital. And where the eye travels, the body wants to follow to see what is on the other side. It is a very clever decorative composition and beautifully executed. Corbel a is a flowery little cluster of arrowhead. It is like a little bouquet. The depiction of cyclamen on corbel b is more complex. There are clusters of cyclamen, with curling vines and deep undercutting. There is much more 'carving' than Edward had shown to this point. The reason for the difference in execution of the two corbels is that John Phillips, in his 1860 counter-request to James, asked James to finish a corbel and spurs on Bay 7. Corbel b shows more of James O'Shea's style and flair.

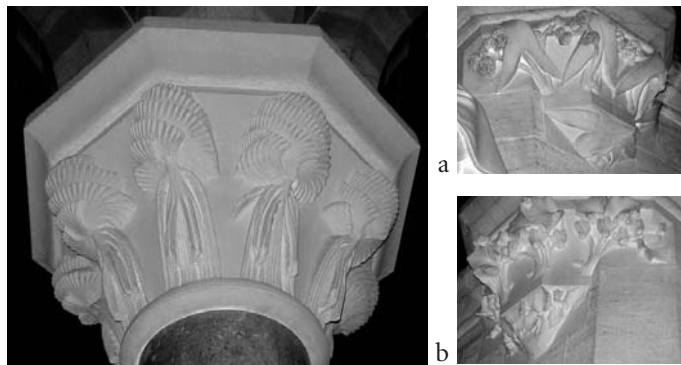


Fig. 7. Bay 7. Capital, screwpine. Corbel a, arrowhead. Corbel b, cyclamen sp. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

<sup>32</sup> Stephens, 'Oxford University Museum', p. 530.

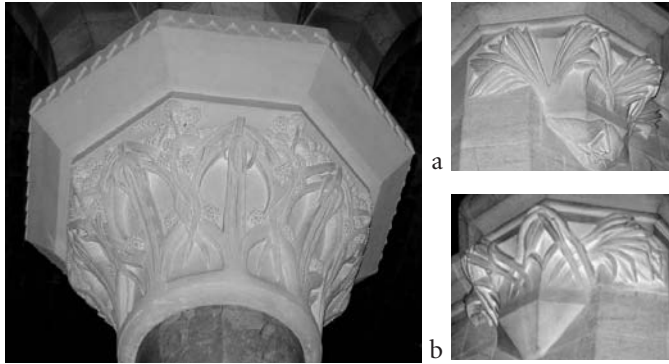


Fig. 8. Bay 8. Capital, burreed. Corbel a, bulrush. Corbel b, bulrush. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

*Bay 8: Edward Whelan.* Again one can see John's influence on the design and composition within this bay (see Fig. 8).

The composition of the capital consists of a simplified rendering of collections of bur reeds (*Sparganium ramosum*). The design initially contains a basic simplicity that one of John's designs might have had, yet Edward has added diagonal elements to the composition, with the addition of roots and meandering leaves. These curving and diagonal lines move the eye round, and create a tension and interest in the composition as a whole. The twists, turns, and folds to the leaves foreshadow *art nouveau* design. These themes are not noticed at first because there is a sense of the business within the elements of the design and composition; it is only after one looks at the capital for a bit that one notices some of these delightful details.

Of the two corbels, again Phillips asked James O'Shea to finish one of those on Bay 8. It is likely that James completed b, the bulrushes. There is a heaviness and complexity in the rendering of the subject and in the composition not evidenced on the other corbel. In spite of the fact that the subject of corbel a is also bulrushes, and even includes two birds in the composition, it is still carved in the style of the capital.

*Bays 9 and 10: John O'Shea.* The design, composition, and style of the capitals and corbels of Bays 9 and 10 tell us that the artist was John O'Shea. The subject for the capital of Bay 9 is dragon arum (*Dracunculus vulgaris*) (see Fig. 9). The few flower-heads displayed are placed about the capital with a detail of leaf in the background. There is nothing to distract the eye from the important aspects of the plant.

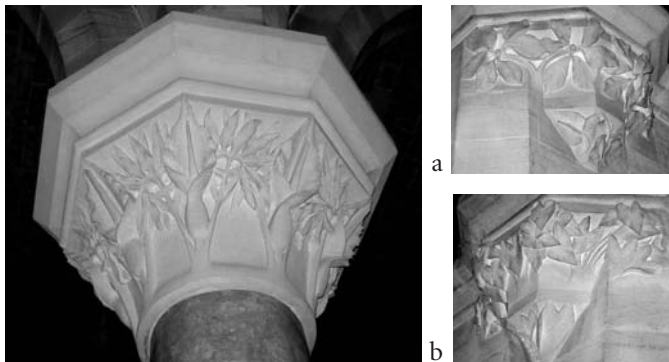


Fig. 9. Bay 9. Capital, dragon arum. Corbel a, Pothos sp. Corbel b, Caladium sp. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

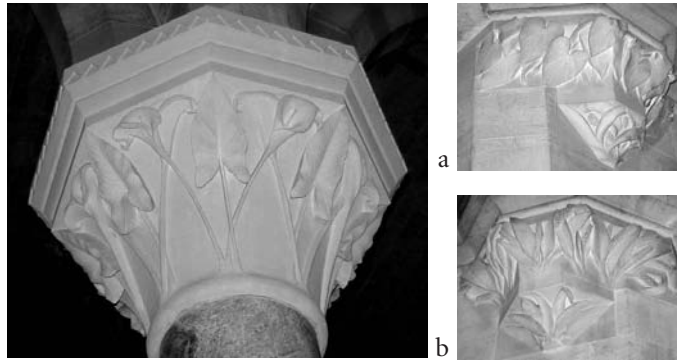


Fig. 10. Bay 10. Capital, arum lily. Corbel a, Pothos sp. Corbel b, golden club. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

Bay 10's subject is arum lily (*Calla aethiopica*) (see Fig. 10). Here stem and leaf as well as flower are depicted. And, as in Bay 9, there are only a few examples placed round the capital. Both capital compositions are simple and decorative, and the detailing is perfect. The plants are there, waiting for the viewer to come and admire their perfection. There is nothing to jar the concentration or distract the eye.

The rendering of the plants in the corbels in both bays is consistent with the simplicity and harmony of the design of the capitals. The elements of both bays create a sense of quiet refined space and decorative harmony.

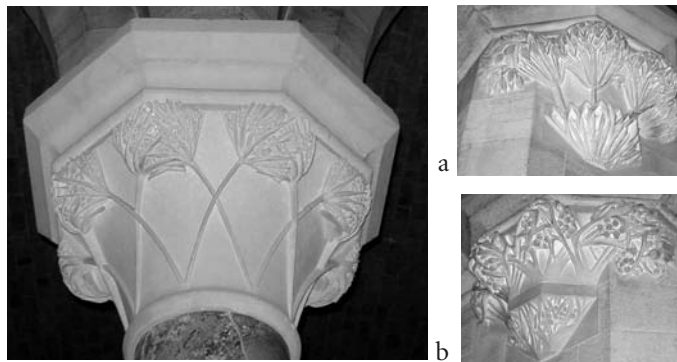


Fig. 11. Bay 11. Capital, sledge. Corbel a, Papyrus sp. Corbel b, sawgrass. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

*Bay 11: Edward Whelan.* Here too John's influence is evident in the basic style and design of the capital. The subject of the capital is a variety of sedge (*Cyperus rigidus*) (see Fig. 11). The grasses are simple in design, few in number, and interestingly placed about the capital in a criss-cross pattern. The heads of the grasses, heavy with seeds, hang down from slender stalks. And yet Edward's personal style is evident, for there is a strong diagonal movement in the rendering of the stalks and drooping heads of the grasses. The rendering of the grass-heads with deep undercutting is a beautifully decorative design. The rendering of the corbels here in Bay 11 is not in harmony with the design, composition, and style of the capital. In the carving of the corbels the complexity of the compositions and the handling of the subject do not match the simple style and design of the capital. While the carving on the capital gives a sense of detachment from the subject – simplicity of style and design – the complexity of the carving of the corbels gives a sense of engagement with the subject. An unsettling element occurs in the carving of the corbels that upsets the equilibrium of the design and composition of the capital and therefore the bay. This is not to say that the corbels are not well carved or interesting, but they just do not harmonize within the bay.

It seems likely that James was back working in the court on Bays 13 and 14 at this time, and that Edward was responding to his personality and style. Consequently there is more involvement and engagement with the subject in Edward's work on the corbels.

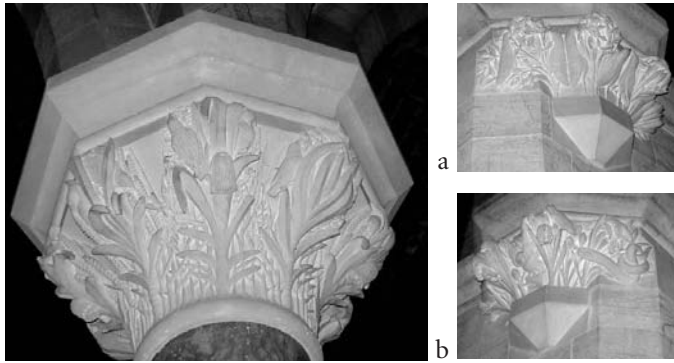


Fig. 12. Bay 12. Capital, wheat, barley, oats, maize, sugar cane. Corbel a, brome. Corbel b, rice and canary grass. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

*Bay 12: Edward Whelan.* If John influenced Edward's work on Bays 7 and 8, and at least upon the capital of Bay 11, James totally influenced Edward's style and composition in Bay 12. The capital is an extremely complex composition of wheat, barley, oats, maize, sugar cane, and sparrows (see Fig. 12). In this bay Edward has shed the restraints of John's influence. He appears to be totally engaged with the subject. He has created notions of surprise and movement within the compositions and design. A sense of joyfulness is discernible, to which the viewer responds by being totally engaged with the subject. One has to walk round and view the capital and corbels from different angles in order to see everything that is going on. There is a sense of fun here, and one does not want to miss anything. There is movement everywhere in the complex compositions of the corbels. Corbel a shows brome, with birds eating seeds, and corbel b comprises rice and canary grass, with buntings, canaries, quail, and a snake. The plants are heavy and complex and undulate about the piers. Animals are prevalent, eating grain, seeds, one another, or just stalking a prospective meal. The corbels' compositions are jarring, unsettling, and a lot of fun to look at. And every time one looks, one finds new things.

*Bays 13 and 14: James O'Shea.* Is there any question as to who the artist is? His style and rendering of the subject are singular. The compositions and designs are so complex and the detail is so precise. These bays are pure, unbridled James O'Shea.

The capital of Bay 13 is golden leather fern (*Acrostichum aureum*) (see Fig. 13). Here there is a profusion of ferns wrapping and 'growing' round the capital. The fronds of the ferns literally unfold before our eyes. The craftsmanship is exquisite, because no matter what the brain tells us, it does not seem possible that stone could be carved to look so pliable and soft. The undercutting is so deep that some fronds are standing alone and unfurling away from the capital. The complexity of the capital is balanced by the simplicity of the rendering of the corbels. Here both corbels consist of simply carved fronds growing up against the piers. They do not pull the eye from the capital.

The capital of Bay 14 comprises a variety of ferns, with a moth, frogs, a snake, and a bat (see Fig. 14). Beautifully constructed ferns unfurl out and away from the capital towards the viewer. Again, the ferns are characteristically pliable and plastic. In this bay, however, the carvings of the corbels are quite detailed. Corbel a has a beautifully rendered hart's tongue and another fern winding up, unfurling, and bumping against the top of the pier. Corbel b is a rendering of mallow. Here the mallow, with its flowers, is so deeply undercut that there appear to be two or three layers of plant on the pier.



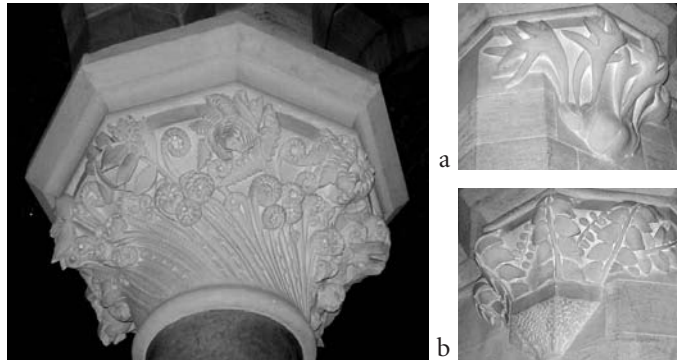


Fig. 13. Bay 13. Capital, golden leatherfern. Corbel a, fern. Corbel b, maidenhair fern. Mason, James O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

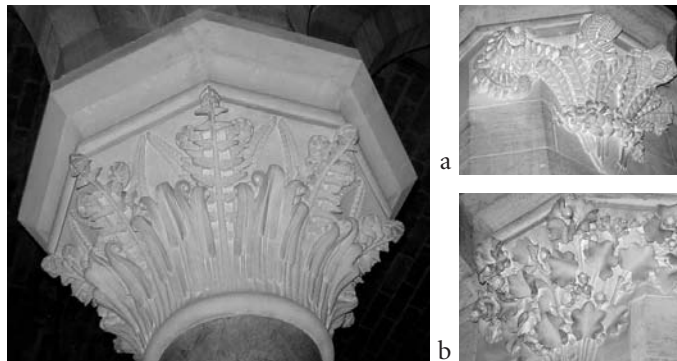


Fig. 14. Bay 14. Capital, ferns. Corbel a, Hart's Tongue. Corbel b, mallow. Mason, James O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

In his early 1860 claim for payment for the completed interior work James referred to two complete bays and five bases on the north side. Phillips counter-requested that James complete and finish the corbels and spurs on Bays 13, 14, and 15. This was also the time that James was instructed to finish the corbels and spurs on Bays 7 and 8. Since James received the balance at the end of March, it may be assumed that he completed the tasks that Phillips set out for him. Though Phillips admired his skill, he kept control over him by means of withholding his final payment until tasks were finished.

#### *East Side Corridor*

*Bays 15, 16, and 17: James O'Shea.* James worked backwards when carving these bays. He started with Bay 17 and worked back to Bay 16 and finally completed Bay 15.

Compared with Bays 13, 14, 16, and 17, Bay 15 is what might be termed a throwaway. The capital's subject is a type of fern or tall grass (*dion edule*) with a variety of animals (see Fig. 15). The grass or ferns are rendered without much attention to detail, having only as much as is necessary for the little animals to peer through. To this observer the only charm of the capital is indeed the animals poking their heads out of the fronds. This bay is not up to the artistic quality and standard one has come to expect from James O'Shea. The style of carving and sense of whimsy of the capital is his, but if one were to compare the basic composition, the quality of design, and the execution of Bay 15 with the other bays, one would be hard pressed to realize that they were designed and executed by the same man. Yet, and perhaps ironically, this is the bay that most appeals to visiting children and their families. It is a picture of this capital that appears in the majority of stories and books about the museum.

James took longer to finish Bay 15 than any other. The museum's archives contain many of John Phillips's notations and notes to James demanding that he finish it. In 1860 James was

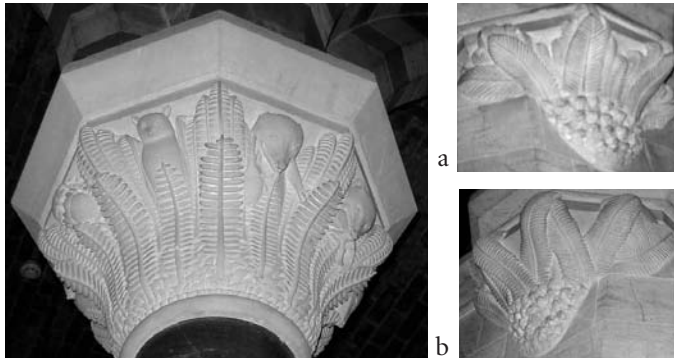


Fig. 15. Bay 15. Capital, *Dion edule*. Corbel a, sago palm. Corbel b, sago palm. Mason, James O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

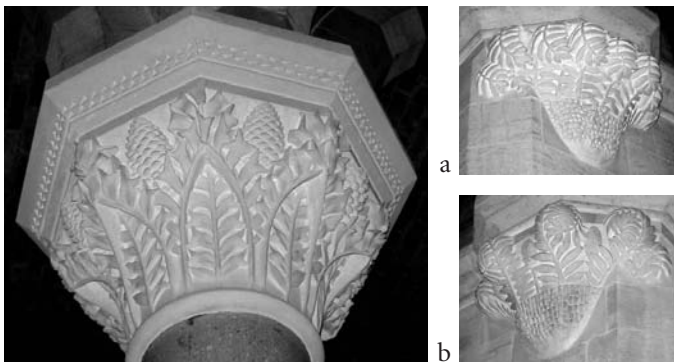


Fig. 16. Bay 16. Capital, *Zamia horrida* or *Encephalartos horridus*. Corbel a, *Encephalartos* sp. Corbel b, *Encephalartos* sp. Mason, James O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

back outside working when he applied for the payment for his work done in the court. Phillips withheld payment until all the work he wanted James to finish had been completed. James would write and list all the things he had done, and Phillips would respond with whatever was still not completed to his satisfaction, always adding 'finish No.15'. Phillips was quite clear in his demands. He was not talking about a corbel or a spur, he was talking about the entire bay.<sup>33</sup> There was a final balance due to 'J. O'Shea' in late March 1860. Thereafter there was no mention of the need to complete work in the bays. James eventually got paid; Phillips was doubtless relieved to get the work finished.

Within Bay 16 there is again harmony and unity of the elements of the composition. Here the capital subject is either *Zamia horrida* or *Encephalartos horridus* (see Fig. 16). The branches/fronds stand upright about the capital. There is deep undercutting of the stems and leaves that make them stand alone round the top of the capital. The composition and design of Bay 16 initially may seem simple when compared with the writhing redwoods of Bay 17. But what may appear simple at first is no less complicated to execute.

The corbels of this bay are very complicated. The fronds bend and twist as they open and unfurl at the top of the piers. There is much detail and movement. And, to judge from the workmanship and details, James was totally committed. The various elements in these two bays all work together. Each is a complete entity and they work well side by side.

There is a unity and harmony throughout in Bay 17. The capital of Bay 17 is rich with details of red cedar (*Thuja siberica*) (see Fig. 17). The tips of the red cedar demonstrate James's characteristic

<sup>33</sup> OUM archives, box 4, folder 4; box 2, folder 7(i).

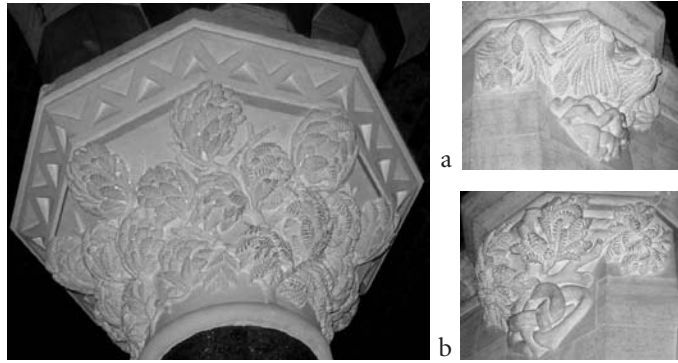


Fig. 17. Bay 17. Capital, red cedar. Corbel a, giant redwood. Corbel b, coastal sequoia. Mason, James O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

deep undercutting, attention to detail, and involvement with the subject. The corbels of this bay are complex and involved. Corbel a (giant redwood boughs with needles and cones) and corbel b (coastal sequoia boughs with needles and cones) seemingly twist and writhe about the piers. If redwood boughs can be joyous and full of life, then they are so here.

*Bays 18, 19, and 20: John O'Shea.* It seems probable that John worked backwards, completing Bays 20 and then 19 and finishing with Bay 18. There seems to be a natural progression towards a simplification in design as one moves from Bay 20 to 19 to 18. The design and stylization in the rendering of the capitals and corbels (especially the corbels of bay 18) are a prelude to the more abstract style that appears in Bay 24.

Bay 18 is a natural extension of the simplification of design that characterizes John's work in the previous bays. The capital subject is a Norwegian spruce (*Abies excelsa*) (see Fig. 18). John has taken the salient features and emphasized them by placing them at the top of the capital. The boughs and branches are mere suggestions that are detailed in a low to medium bas-relief.

The corbels are the major departure here. The corbels of Bay 18 a (stone pine) and b (a cluster pine) display an abstract suggestion of knobs of pine needles. It is a total departure from what we would have expected of him if we had not noticed in the last few bays that he was moving towards a simplification of form and design. Nevertheless, it still comes as a surprise that he creates an abstract, an impressionistic sculpture of pine needles.

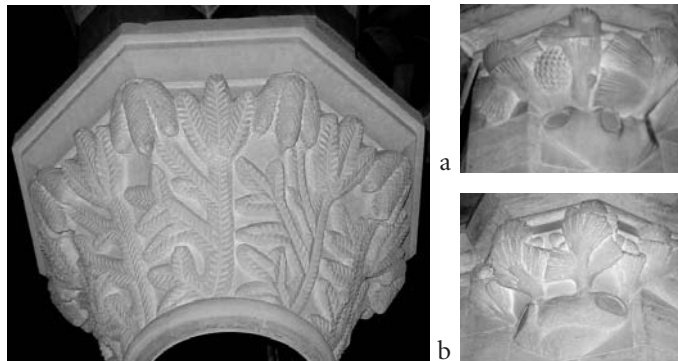


Fig. 18. Bay 18. Capital, Norway spruce. Corbel a, stone pine. Corbel b, cluster pine. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

The capital of Bay 19, a monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria imbricate*), initially seems a complex and more involved composition when compared with that of the previous bay, but it is, in fact, simply more examples of the monkey puzzle branches and cones (see Fig. 19). The design of the capital almost looks like a simplified and static shadow of James's capital in Bay 17. On this

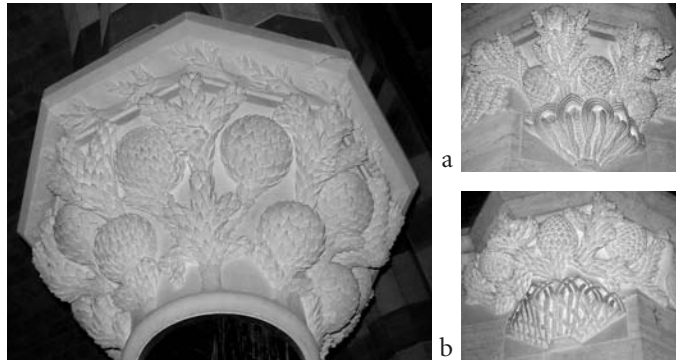


Fig. 19. Bay 19. Capital, monkey puzzle tree. Corbel a, Moreton Bay pine. Corbel b, *Araucaria braziliensis*. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

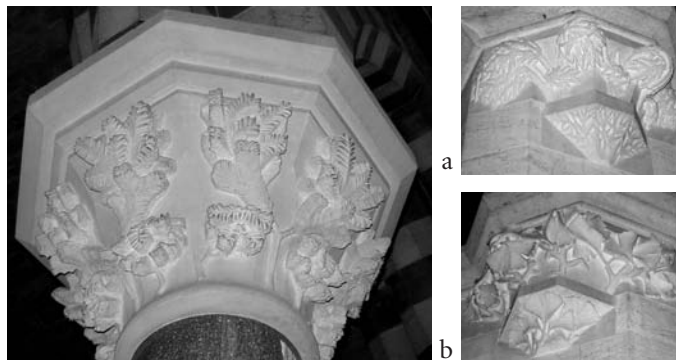


Fig. 20. Bay 20. Capital, English yew. Corbel a, pine. Corbel b, *Salisburia* sp. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

capital nothing is moving or twisting. The monkey puzzle branches and seed cones are just there waiting to be observed. The composition of the corbels in Bay 19 is also complex and detailed. Corbel b even includes a bird, but lacking the animated movement to be seen in James's work in Bays 13, 14, or 17.

The subject for the capital of Bay 20 is English yew (*Taxus baccata*) (see Fig. 20). The yew branches, with sharp little edges, are very different from John's other carvings in the court. Although the subject is complex, the rendering of it is meticulous. His composition and design are very simple and static. He has placed the tips of the yew branches round the capital. They do not move or twist. They are simply there. He is focusing on the major aspects of the plant and emphasizing them. The subject of corbel a (a type of pine), apparently a complicated and detailed mass of branches, is, in fact, a static composition. Corbel b similarly spreads out round the edges of the piers but seems more of a static fan of ginkgo branches spread out round the top of the pier.

*Bays 21 and 22: Edward Whelan.* Edward had developed significant carving skills, which he demonstrated here. He had learned to carve leaves, ivy and vine especially. The rendering is beautifully executed. His skill with deep undercutting and his ability to create the twisting and curling of the leaves is masterful.

There are massive amounts of foliage in both bays. The subject of the capital of Bay 21 is *Smilax sarsaparilla*, with two birds, while that of the capital of Bay 22 is black bryony (*Tamus communis*) (see Fig. 21). In Bay 21 masses of smilax surround the capital.

In Bay 22 the black bryony foliage winds artfully about the capital (see Fig. 22). The basic design and composition of these bays is simple and decorative. This may reflect more of John's influence (with the addition of more elements and a strong diagonal movement) than that of James, who was working outside on the windows. The corbels of Bays 21 and 22 are very much

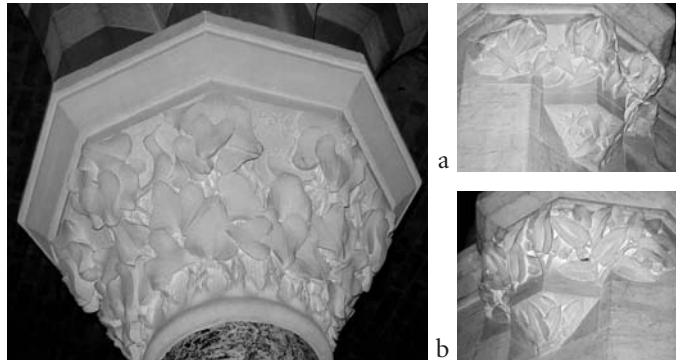


Fig. 21. Bay 21. Capital, Smilax sarsaparilla. Corbel a, prickly ivy. Corbel b, bamboo vine. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

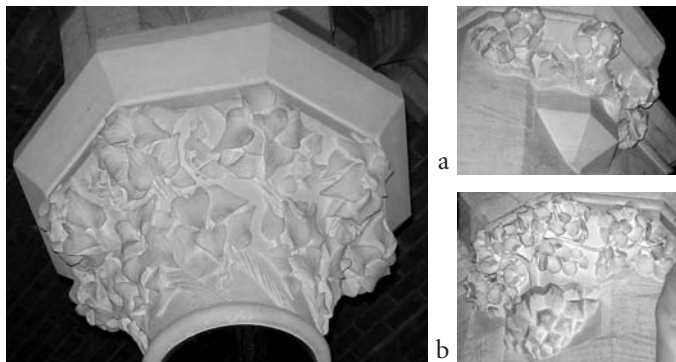


Fig. 22. Bay 22. Capital, black bryony. Corbel a, small-leaved bryony. Corbel b, elephant's foot. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

in the style of the capitals, and there is a unity of all the elements. The vines of the corbels move and edge their way up and round the piers. The thriving bryony in Bay 22 creeps its way up and round to the left of the pier, just like the bryony of the capital.

This capital of black bryony is the capital supposedly described by Georgiana Burne-Jones as having been carved by Rossetti.<sup>34</sup> In F. G. Stephens's article on the University Museum, written at the time the carvings were being done, he singled out a few bays for comment. Stephens was quite clear in his identification of the artist who completed Bay 21, and he also remarked on Bay 23 on the south side. By observing style alone, one would know that the artist who had carved Bay 21 had also carved Bay 22 and then turned the corner and completed Bay 23. That artist was Edward Whelan.<sup>35</sup> Stephens described the development of a special class of men at the museum who held a position between the skilled artisan and the artist, and were limited to one or two families. The only people named were James and John O'Shea and Edward Whelan. If more people had been involved in the carving of significant elements of the bays, it seems likely that he would have mentioned them.

#### *South Side Corridor*

*Bay 23: Edward Whelan.* The capital is a very simplified composition of a variety of orchid (see Fig. 23). It is beautifully rendered, but again static. The basic design echoes that of the capital he completed in Bay 8. The stems and leaves create such cross-hatching design that the focus – the orchid blossoms – are practically hidden among the diagonal lines of the stem and leaves.

<sup>34</sup> Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic*, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Stephens, 'Oxford University Museum', p. 530.



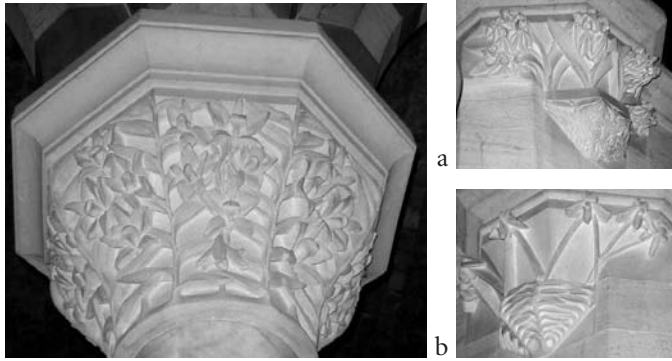


Fig. 23. Bay 23. Capital, orchid. Corbel a, orchid. Corbel b, lady's slipper. Mason, Edward Whelan. (Photographs by author.)

The corbels are really intriguing. Corbel a (a variety of orchid), and b (lady's slipper) are quite abstractly rendered. The lady's slipper is no more than a bas-relief – a suggestion of a plant with a flower. It is not known if this rendering denotes a change in Edward's own style, or if it is an echo of John's clear stylistic shift evidenced in the adjoining bay.

This was the last bay that Edward completed in the lower court. Thereafter he moved upstairs to the upper arcade, where he completed the cornice on the west side and was credited with having completed the half pier at the north-west angle and sixteen capitals on the upper level on the west side of the gallery. The work was carried out between 1856 and 1861, before the money ran out and work was stopped.<sup>36</sup> When Edward was working by himself on the upper west arcade the designs were not inspired. Arguably Edward's designs for the upper west arcade, where he worked by himself, lack originality. The designs feel cramped and made to fit within an arbitrary shape imposed upon the capital. Edward was playing safe. If a client wanted a carving to look a certain way, Edward could be relied upon to meet the request, unlike James, who could be very self-willed. James could be relied upon to provide exquisite carving, but he might or might not complete the work as ordered without some added incentives, such as withholding his pay until the job was completed. John could be counted upon to carve the stone beautifully and complete the job without problems, but he would bring to the job his style and sense of design regardless of what the client might envision. On the two bays where he adapted his compositional style to both Phillips's requests and the client's initial sketch, the results are disconcerting.<sup>37</sup>

Edward was a reliable worker, who apparently got along with those in authority. He lasted when both John and James had left. It is to Edward that the carving of the chimney-piece in the Hope Workroom can be attributed. He received the balance due to him for the completion of the chimney-piece on 29 September 1860. But, in spite of all his reliable work, the university did not invite him back in 1879, when they wanted the entrance porch completed. They wanted John, but settled for James.<sup>38</sup>

*Bays 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30: John O'Shea.* John's style had evolved to be more abstract, almost impressionistic. The suggestion of change that was seen in the simplification and rendering of the pine knobs in Bay 18 is now developed. From this point on, John's style reflects a great simplicity of form and detail. The subjects reveal only what is necessary for identification. The compositions of the capitals are obviously much simpler in detail. The leaves, stem, flowers, or fruit are all there, only not so obviously. Only the features vital for identification stand out, the rest are only suggested. Stephens noted this difference in style:

<sup>36</sup> Birkin Haward, *Oxford University Museum, its Architecture and Art* (Oxford, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> OUM, lower court, Bay 29, Bay 30; OUM archives, box 2, folder 6: Phillips's notes for bays 29, 30.

<sup>38</sup> OUM archives, box 3, folder 3, Adm. Matters iii; box 5a.

... a characteristic which indicates the possession of something like the feeling for conventionalized treatment of architectonic decoration, which we before said was needed to satisfy a higher demand than the mere love of reproduction, however elegant, exquisitely minute, and faithful it may be. Simpler in the general forms, chastened and more severe, at the same time with notably less luxuriance and delight of love in the 'lush green' than his competitors, Mr. John O'Shea seems to us to have seen something deeper into the needs of architectural art.<sup>39</sup>

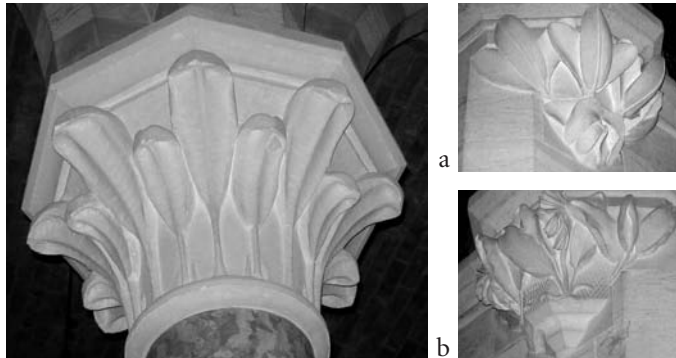


Fig. 24. Bay 24. Capital, banana. Corbel a, banana. Corbel b, bird of paradise. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

*Bay 24: John O'Shea.* Bay 24's capital and corbel a consist of banana (*Musa*) leaves and nothing more (see Fig. 24). The leaves of the capital are arranged facing outward towards the viewer, alternating in height round the bell of the capital. On corbel a the clusters of the leaves are facing inward towards the pier. The foliage of the capital has a sense of openness, while that on the corbel has a sense of turning away, of being closed off. The carving of corbel b, a bird of paradise, is just a suggestion of a flower. Cross-hatching on the capital face itself helps to separate the low relief from the background face of the stone.

*Bays 25, 26, and 27: John O'Shea.* The capital of Bay 25 is a simple composition of *Maranta* (see Fig. 25). One can see stems, leaves, and flowers, but they seem merely schematic. Every part is accounted for, and in just enough detail to render identification. In the rendering of the corbels one gets a sense of the plants, but not much more.

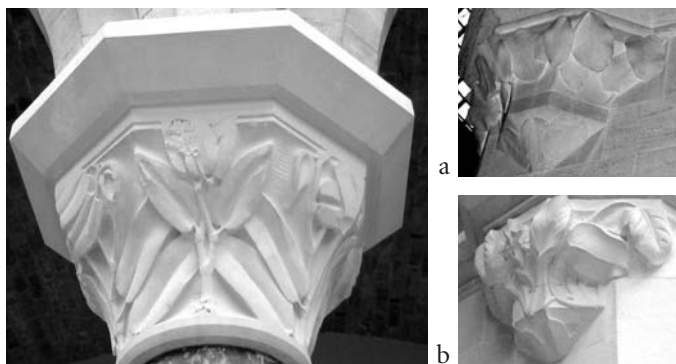


Fig. 25. Bay 25. Capital, *Maranta* sp. Corbel a, *Maranta bicolor*. Corbel b, *Heliconia* sp. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

<sup>39</sup> Stephens, 'Oxford University Museum', p. 530.

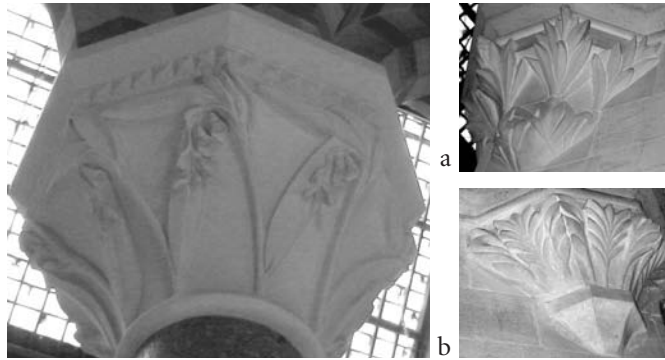


Fig. 26. Bay 26. Capital, ginger. Corbel a, ginger. Corbel b, broad-leaved ginger. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

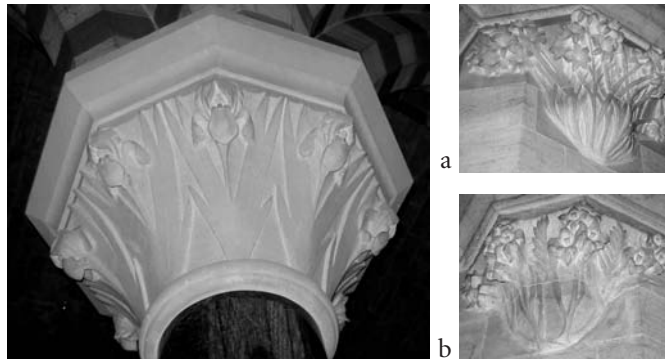


Fig. 27. Bay 27. Capital, German iris. Corbel a, lily. Corbel b, Gladiolus sp. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

Bay 26's capital suggests a variety of ginger (*Alpinia nutans*) (see Fig. 26). Again, the emphasis – what there is of it – is placed at the top of the capital with stems, leaves, and ginger flowers artfully displayed round the capital. The salient features of the plant are rendered in a low-to-medium bas-relief.

Irises (*Iris germanica*) comprise the flowers for the capital in Bay 27 (see Fig. 27). Again, only the simplified and very stylized flower is rendered with any definition and prominence. All else is merely suggested and traced on to the face of the capital. Stephens described John rendering the iris in Bay 27 in a low relief, with leaves traced rather than carved. He felt that it 'indicated a reticence of skill which is, in our opinion, a worthy sign.'<sup>40</sup>

*Bays 28, 29, and 30: John O'Shea.* The flowers of the capital of Bay 28 are wild daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) (see Fig. 28). The flowers themselves, impressionistic renditions of daffodils, are placed for emphasis one above the other round the capital. The leaves are merely indicated by a low relief, but here on the capital the negative space – that is, the space which is not leaf or flower – is scratched into the face of the stone. So there is a mere suggestion of leaves done in a low relief, standing just beyond a defined background created by scratching into the surface face of stone. This is the only bay that John did this type of rendering of the stone with the two corbels and the capital.

The capitals for Bays 29 and 30 show a departure from the simple, stylized, and schematic handling of the previous bays. In both these bays the rendering of the subject of the capital is simplified and stylized, with the important features placed round the top of the capital. But in these bays there seems to be more definition, more attention, and more interest given

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

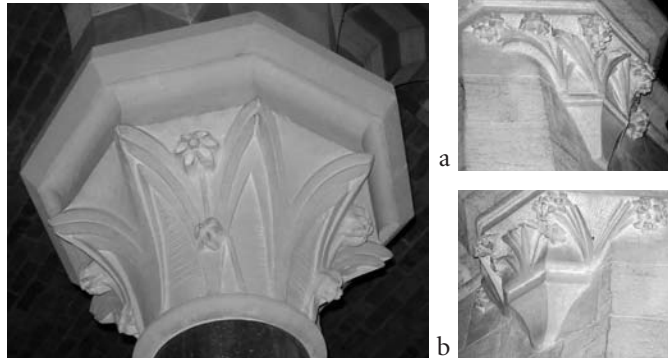


Fig. 28. Bay 28. Capital, wild daffodil. Corbel a, narcissus. Corbel b, narcissus. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

to unnecessary stems and leaves. After viewing the previous bays, which were in effect simple schematic renderings of plants and flowers, these two do not fit into the style. Perhaps John had carved them, or at least the capital of 29, out of order. But that would not have been in keeping with Benjamin Woodward's plan. Another carver, Mr Flinn perhaps, had carved a portion of these bays, but there is no indication that anyone other than John O'Shea did any work from bays 24 to 30. And the artistic style evidenced in the carving in these bays is that of John O'Shea.

The answer resides in the museum archives. Lord and Lady Trevelyan jointly donated monies for five capitals, as well as five shafts. Later Lady Pauline Trevelyan gave money for two additional capitals. There are seven Trevelyan capitals to be accounted for in the lower court. According to Phillips's notes, the subjects of Bay 1, water plantain, Bay 2, rushes, and Bay 3, date palm, were based, at least initially on three of Lady Trevelyan's sketches. There is still a watercolour of a date palm in the archives, but it is not known if Lady Trevelyan painted it. Bay 6, the big bouquet of lilies and tulips, everyone knows. The fifth Trevelyan capital is that of Bay 27 – iris. John Phillips's notes show that Bays 29, amaryllis, and 30, pineapples, are the remaining two Trevelyan capitals. Lady Trevelyan's sketches were really no more than simple line drawings, and the carver had very little in the way of directions to work from. This lack of official dictate allowed the carvers their freedom to create. John Phillips on both Bay 6 and Bay 29 fleshed out the drawings with notations and suggestions.

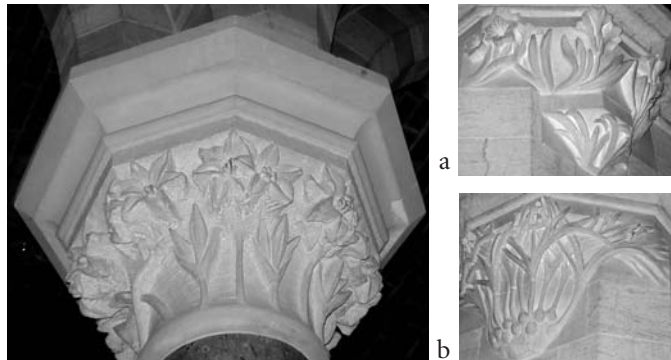


Fig. 29. Bay 29. Capital, Amaryllis. Corbel a, Scarborough lily. Corbel b, Leucojum sp. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

Bay 29 is another bouquet – this time of amaryllis (*Amaryllis Johnsoni*) (see Fig. 29).<sup>41</sup> The composition and design of the capital is more complicated than the capital in the previous few bays. There are many clusters of flowers placed round the top of the capital, but here there is also

<sup>41</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 6.

an abundance of stems and leaves that take up space round the bottom of the capital. There seems to be a profusion of stems and leaves in the composition, and the effect as a whole seems cluttered after viewing the simplicity of the previous bays. Both corbels initially seem to have more detail than those of the previous bays, with the emphasis on the curling and bending of stems and leaves and very little interest in the flowers. But it is the capital that is out of line with all the previous capitals on the south side.

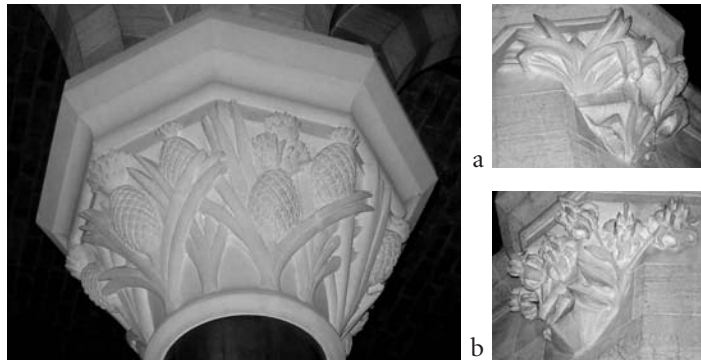


Fig. 30. Bay 30. Capital, pineapple. Corbel a, pineapple. Corbel b, tiger lily. Mason, John O'Shea. (Photographs by author.)

Bay 30 has stylized pineapples with bold leaves marching round the top of the capital (*Ananassa sativa*) (see Fig. 30). Here the details of the pineapples are simplified and stylized, and cross-hatching delineates the detail of the fruit rather than the negative space. John O'Shea's composition, although a bit cluttered, is a much more interesting design than the original sketch, which consisted of pineapples placed side to side of one another, ringing the base of the capital.<sup>42</sup>

#### *The Pier Corbels (Figs 31–6)*

John O'Shea completed the bays on the south side by 27 April 1860. Between then and 12 May, when he was paid off, he completed two corbels on the piers of the southernmost archway into the court from the western corridor (pier A north, and pier B south) (see Figs 31 and 32). When he left there were three unfinished corbels on the entrance archways. James had completed the southern one on the main archway entrance into the court. It is fondly referred to as oak leaves and tube squirrel. (Pier C south) (see Fig. 33). Before he left the museum, in October 1861, Edward completed the three unfinished corbels: Pier B north, Pier C north, and Pier D south (see Figs 34, 35, and 36).<sup>43</sup> In 1879 James O'Shea was brought back to carve the eleven capitals in the inner porch.<sup>44</sup>

This fairly detailed tour of the lower court of the museum has attempted to answer some long unaddressed questions. For example, what to look for in matters of style, design, and composition in order to identify the carvers and their work. In addition, the existence of the seven Trevelyan capitals, as well as their location in the lower court, were the answers to questions never previously raised. Yet further questions have arisen. In 1863 John Ruskin questioned Henry Acland about their friend James O'Shea: had he seen James recently? If James O'Shea was in Oxford, he had to be working. So one wonders what other works he and his colleagues might have completed. And of these works what might still be in existence. Questions remain as to what work if any William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti contributed. Again it is quite difficult to believe that they could

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> OUM archives, box 3, folder 3.

<sup>44</sup> O'Dwyer, *Deane and Woodward*, p. 252.





Fig. 31. Pier A, north, sweet chestnut leaves and fruit. Mason, John O'Shea. (*Photograph by author.*)



Fig. 32. Pier B, south, sweet chestnut leaves with catkins. Mason, John O'Shea. (*Photograph by author.*)



Fig. 33. Pier C, south, oak leaves, acorns, and squirrels. Mason, James O'Shea. (*Photograph by author.*)



Fig. 34. Pier B, north, oak leaves and acorns. Mason, Edward Whelan. (*Photograph by author.*)



Fig. 35. Pier C, north, aspen. Mason, Edward Whelan. (*Photograph by author.*)



Fig. 36. Pier D, south, aspen. Mason, Edward Whelan. (*Photograph by author.*)

have worked and carved anything at the museum and left no record of it: they were mentioned neither in the carefully maintained pay ledgers, nor in John Phillips's notes.<sup>45</sup>

Of rather more importance is the urban myth concerning the O'Sheas. Many years after they had worked on the museum, what probably began as an amusing anecdote in a speech by Acland was repeated and eventually written down and became fact. It is likely that after repeating the stories again and again, Acland himself came to believe his tales about the infamous O'Sheas.<sup>46</sup> But where was Ruskin? Why did he not say something at the time? James O'Shea's artistic skill should at least have earned Ruskin's respect, but he did not correct the stories, even though they were detrimental to O'Shea's reputation. Ruskin's attitude towards the museum building and to those who assisted in its creation had undergone notable changes. In 1855 he had entered on the project with enthusiasm and hope. The building was to be the realization of his precepts and philosophy of art and architecture. But by 1877 he was fighting his own demons, and he looked back upon the building and everything connected with it with disillusionment. He literally could find nothing of value. In his 1877 Slade lecture he described the museum as a 'shabby bit of work' and criticized James O'Shea:

He was a man of truest genius, and of the kindest nature. Not only the best, but the only person who could have done anything of what we wanted to do here. But he could only have done anything of it after many years of honest learning; and he too easily thought in the pleasure of his first essays, that he had nothing to learn ... I hoped he would find his way in time, but hoped, as so often, in vain.<sup>47</sup>

Ruskin further stated that

in saying that ornament should be founded on natural form, I no more meant that a mason could carve a capital by merely looking at a leaf, than that a painter could paint a Madonna by merely looking at a young lady. And when I said that the workman should be left free to design his work as he went on, I never meant that you could secure a great natural monument of art by letting loose the first lively Irishman you could get hold of to do what he liked in it.<sup>48</sup>

Those were not the words of a man who was planning to spend time and energy defending Irish stone carvers and correcting misstatements. Indeed, this so-called friend of humble artisans proved disdainful of their untutored craftsmanship, not to mention their Irish blood. So, over more time, the inconsistencies within the stories did not matter, either because no one paid attention to the details, or no one whose reputation was directly involved was still around in Oxford, or it was just easier to go along with the stories because they made good copy and were memorable. And, even today, the stories are still memorable and still repeated, but humour is not always harmless. Rather than being judged by their art – their skill, their design, their craftsmanship, their body of work – these men are memorialized today in Oxford largely because of amusing anecdotes told at their expense. Yet visitors to the Oxford University Museum still gather and gaze and marvel at the incredible carvings these men created. Their art has withstood the test of time and can still resonate and captivate the viewer.

<sup>45</sup> OUM archives, box 2, folder 10; box 4, folder 1(ii); box 5, folder 5.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Acland, John Ruskin, and John Phillips, *The Oxford Museum*, 1st edn (Oxford, 1859), 2nd edn (1860); 4th edn (1867); 5th edn (1893). There is no mention of any of the O'Shea stories until the 5th edition of the pamphlet.

<sup>47</sup> O'Dwyer, *Deane and Woodward*, p. 251.

<sup>48</sup> Daniels and Brandwood, *Ruskin and Architecture*, p. 81.

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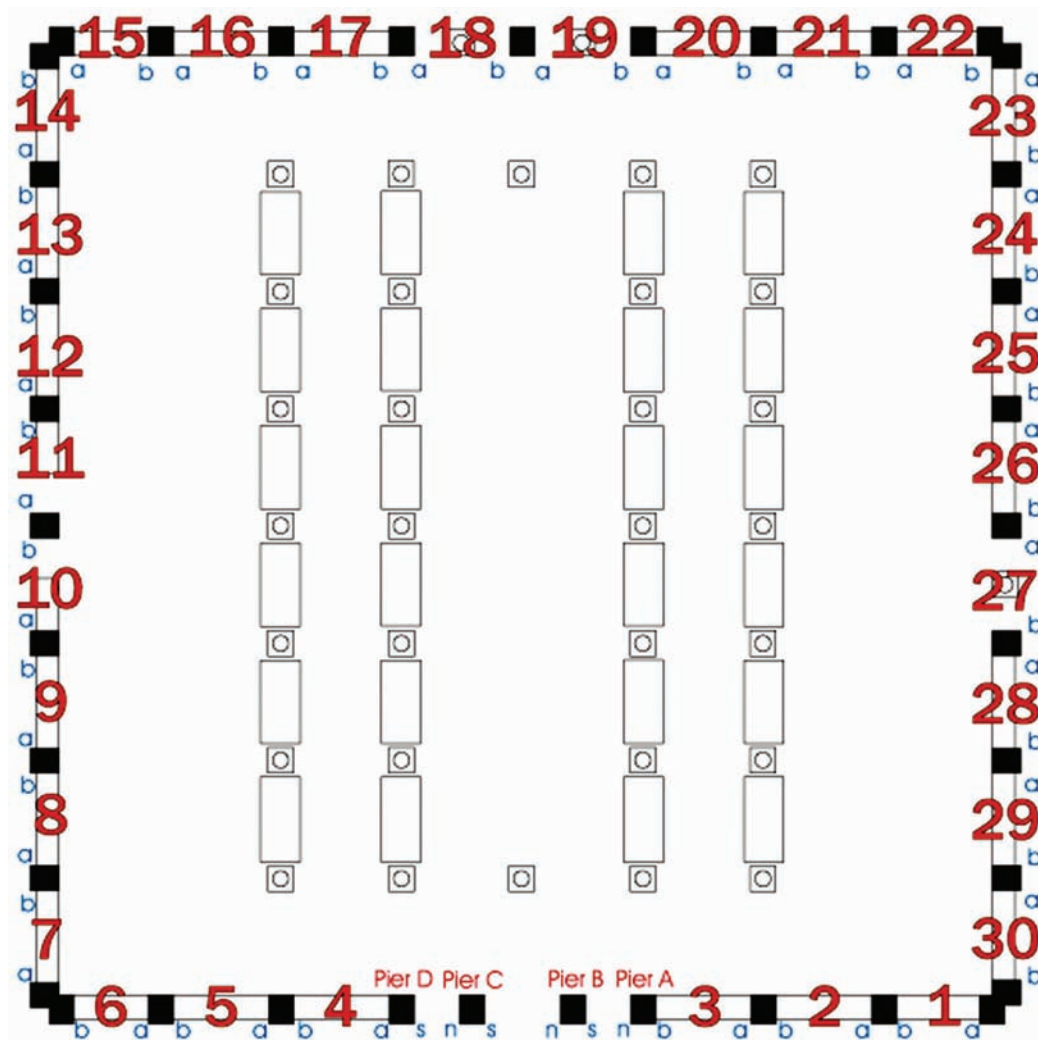


Plate 16. The Lower Court, Oxford University Museum. (*By courtesy of the Oxford University Museum.*)  
[Gilbert, pp. 91–109.]